

Expert: disrupted routine often at heart of child deaths

Thirty-eight children die on average in the United States every year from being left unattended in vehicles on warm days.

By: **Dave Olson**, Forum News Service Published June 12, 2013, 09:46 PM

MOORHEAD — Thirty-eight children die on average in the United States every year from being left unattended in vehicles on warm days.

Who is leaving the children unattended?

It happens to mothers and fathers. It happens to grandparents and uncles, said Amber Rollins, director of KidsAndCars.org, a group that tracks statistics on children who die or are injured after being left in vehicles parked in parking lots or driveways.

Rollins said before Tuesday evening's incident in which a 5-month-old Moorhead girl died after being left unattended in a van for several hours, there were already 11 similar cases reported around the country this year.

"People tend to judge these parents and label them as monsters," Rollins said.

"In fact," she said, "they are otherwise loving, caring, responsible, attentive, educated parents; the type of parents that take every safety precaution and go above and beyond. That's who it's happening to."

When children die after being left unattended in vehicles, one factor consistently turns up in case after case, said Rollins, whose organization has collected data on such deaths since 1995.

"In almost every single incident in which a child is unknowingly left behind, there is a change in the normal routine," Rollins said.

"Many times, a child is left behind when they were supposed to be dropped off at day care and maybe dad normally took the baby, but on this particular day mom had to take the baby to day care," she said.

Whether a caregiver is charged varies widely, depending on who was providing the care and where in the country the death occurred, Rollins said.

"We don't see any real pattern. You could take two identical cases and one parent might be charged with murder and another parent might not be charged at all." Someone like a babysitter or child care provider is more likely to face charges than a parent, she said.

Factors in charges

An Associated Press analysis in 2007 of more than 310 fatal incidents found that mothers were treated much more harshly by the courts than were fathers.

While the study found that mothers and fathers were charged and convicted at about the same rates, moms were 26 percent more likely to do time and their median sentence was two years longer than the terms received by dads.

The study found that paid babysitters are more likely than parents to be charged and convicted, but they were jailed less frequently than parents and for less than half the time.

The study showed that charges were filed in about half of all cases involving children who died after being left in vehicles.

Ken Kohler, an area attorney and a former Clay County (Minn.) prosecutor, said some of what has been reported regarding the incident in Moorhead on Tuesday night could prompt a prosecutor to consider charges.

"Clearly, the decision of leaving the child alone waves red flags," he said. The time period the child was apparently left in the vehicle — about four hours — is also significant, he said.

"This one has gotta be one they (prosecutors) strongly consider," he said. In cases like this, prosecutors have charging options ranging from involuntary manslaughter to criminal neglect, Kohler said.

"There isn't any per se thresholds that you can measure," he said. "You're looking at a case by case basis."

A Moorhead Police Department shift summary of Tuesday's incident described the apartment where the young girl lived as extremely filthy and stated the five other children living there were placed with Clay County Social Services.

Kohler said there may be charges based on the children's living conditions if they're warranted, but the bar is set pretty high in such situations.

"A messy home doesn't necessarily mean you've got a health issue," he said.

“Now, if you’re letting dogs and cats run lose and not picking up after them, if you’ve got bad food and those types of things ... a parent is obligated to provide necessary shelter, clothing, supervision and care for a child,” Kohler said.

Surprising facts

Rollins offered a caution for those who think they are incapable of putting a child in danger.

“One thing I think would really surprise people is that cracking a window in a car doesn’t do anything to slow down how fast the inside of a car heats up,” she said.

“People think if they crack their windows they could leave the kids, or the dog, in the car for just a few minutes,”

Rollins said. For an infant or toddler, temperatures in a car can reach fatal temperatures within minutes, she said.

“And their little bodies heat up three to five times faster than an adult’s. They can’t cool themselves the same way we can.

“If they’re in there for even a short amount of time,” she said, “it could lead to serious brain damage or even death very quickly.”

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